

It's getting late. The waitress comes to collect.
We pay and leave. Head for the station.
"So you like teacking?" he asks. I reflect
On it and then I say, almost to myself,
"No, I love it." Unfashionable admission,
But there it is. Teaching's been my life.

— Michael Fessler

Kanagawa-ken Japan

M'LADY

M'Lady Ocean. Her name is Melady O'Shane, but he calls her M'Lady Ocean.

M'Lady Ocean. The first time he called her that they were pressed together in his single bed, warm and close enough to sleep they could not distinguish the borders of their bodies. He called her M'Lady Ocean and she smiled and her teeth sparkled in the shine of the night. She turned her head to him and she asked him what he meant. He kept his eyes closed and shook his head as he smiled with her. He told her that lying next to her was like lying on a dark beach, watching lightning over a horizon of water. When she asked, he could not tell her why. He just said that sometimes she was overwhelming in a way that bordered on fear.

Pj has lived in California and thinks he knows the ocean. Because Melady has told him her measurements, that she sucked her thumb until she was nine and that she masturbates, Pj thinks he knows all of her secrets. She smokes for Pj because she knows he likes to see her with a cigarette, she once let Pj take pictures of her body, and she stays with him despite his impotency. For these reasons he believes she has top billing in his melodrama.

Pj thinks he knows the ocean but forgets there is more of the sea beyond and below the horizon of his view. For example, he does not know that Melady watches daytime television when she's home alone. He doesn't know where she buys her clothes or that she likes to ride escalators and push the buttons in elevators. That she is careful of cracks when she walks on sidewalks. That she doesn't like horror films, heavy metal, or chinese food as much as she claims. That she gives money to street musicians and once dropped a ten dollar bill in the lap of a man in a wheelchair blowing sax. That she thinks she's too nice.

Neither does Pj know that Melady keeps a plastic bottle of strawberry flavored lubricant in her purse because she likes the taste and sucks the nectar from the finger she's dipped in the bottle when she drives. He doesn't know her fantasies or that she's convinced her fantasies are perverse. He knows that she masturbates but has no idea how frequently. He does not know that once she slept with another man. That she's scared to death he will propose to her. That she's afraid to tell him she sometimes loses faith in their relationship. That sometimes she feels vast like a sea. He knows her tears taste like the ocean but doesn't realize that's where she gets them.

Melady is sitting at the edge of the kitchen. The gossamer dress she wears as comfortably as a bad habit is plain and faded. She is facing the telephone on the wall, sitting side saddle beside an old laminated table with chrome legs that are beginning to show the varicose veins of rust. While she waits out the rings, she traces his initials over the underside of her wrist with a pen that has run out of ink.

The phone stops ringing. Melady hears his best friend, Trash, say hello.

Hi, it's me, she says. She curls the phone cord around her finger.

She feigns a brief laugh. She is smiling nervously, as if he were watching her.

Hey, she says, gently interrupting Trash. I was just wondering about Peej. He's been pretty quiet lately. You know, distant, and I was just wondering if you knew anything. I mean, has he told you anything about what he's thinking?

Pj thinks he knows the ocean but knows nothing about all of the life beneath the surface. And that's what Pj does not see in Melady. That she is the kind of woman that will call a friend to find out what you've been thinking, that will love you after you immerse yourself in her without ever touching bottom.

— Paul Jensi

Paris, France